Australia’s Parliamentary Diplomacy: A Study of the Bilateral Relationship with South Korea

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Introduction

Academic and benchmarking studies characterize South Korean administrative culture as ‘hierarchical, authoritative, paternal, emotional, irrational and familial’.¹ For the diplomatic corps in Seoul, this can present challenges.² South Korea does not have a strong party political system and the political environment centres on individuals and personal networks, which can be fluid and dynamic. Diplomatic officers at early stages of their careers can find it difficult to secure access to more senior decision makers – including social, business, and political leaders. In this respect, parliamentary diplomacy theoretically facilitates more direct interaction between diplomats and those leaders.

Since industrialisation in the 1970s, Australia and South Korea enjoyed a stable economic relationship. Australia exports raw materials, such as coal and iron ore, and it imports elaborately transformed manufactures, such as cars, machinery and electronics. South Korea recovered rapidly from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and its position in regional and global affairs grew quickly. Since this time, Australian efforts to expand the relationship with South Korea have enjoyed strong bipartisan support. The period 1996–2015 can thus be considered as a formative one in the modern bilateral relationship, marked by economic stability and growth in the political and security fields. It could be assumed that parliamentary diplomacy played a particularly important role in building Australia’s relations with South Korea.

The Australian Government’s narrative describing the importance and relevance of Australia’s relationship with the Republic of Korea (South Korea) during this formative period consists of three core stories. The first story conveys

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how Australian missionaries made early contact with Korea in the nineteenth century. This gives the bilateral relationship historical authority. The second story conveys Australia’s contribution to the defence of South Korea during the Korean War (1950–1953). This imbues a sense of shared sacrifice and reciprocity. The third story relates to mutual benefit, shared interests and similarity. Since South Korea’s industrialization in the 1970s, the two states have shared a mutually beneficial economic relationship; and since the post Cold War era they have shared similar views on a liberal democratic, rules-based global order, the role of the United States (US) in the Asia-Pacific, and their own status as globally active, innovative middle powers. These stories are retold on occasions when Australians and South Koreans gather, including at academic forums, business seminars, and state visits. They are also routinely reiterated by Australian parliamentarians on outward delegation visits to South Korea. On such occasions, Australian parliamentarians act as instruments of the executive, reiterating and reinforcing the Australian Government’s narrative.

Yet parliamentarians theoretically also play a secondary role. In diplomatic representation, they can act both as instruments of the executive and as independent international actors. In international affairs, parliamentarians can therefore theoretically sustain multiple narratives.3

This raises the following question: to what extent do the narratives of Australian parliamentarians differ from the official narratives of the Australian Government on the relationship with South Korea? To answer this question, this chapter seeks not only to investigate the role of parliamentary diplomacy in building Australia’s relationship with South Korea, but also to examine the balance between executive authority and parliamentary prerogative in the exercise of Australia’s parliamentary diplomacy. To this end, I first examine Australia’s institutional structures for parliamentary diplomacy. I then briefly explore the Australian Government’s narrative on the relationship with South Korea through ministerial speeches, before contrasting these with Parliament’s narrative on the relationship with South Korea through official delegation reports and speeches. The chapter finds that the administrative structures underpinning Australian parliamentary diplomacy can limit parliamentary prerogative. However, when parliamentary interests coalesce with the executive, Parliament reinforces and enhances the executive’s capacity, with parliamentary diplomacy providing the means to communicate political